

ISAIAH – LESSON TWENTY TWO

ISAIAH 57 - 59

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

A Rebuke of the Wickedness of Isaiah's Day

Vv. 1-2 – “Blessed Are the Dead Who Die in the Lord”

Isaiah denounced the injustice that was rampant in Judah. Not only did righteous people suffer and even die unjustly, no one seemed to notice or, if they noticed, they did not care. Another thing that was not noticed was that the death of the righteous protected them from future evil (1) and enabled them to enter into peace and rest (see Rev. 14:13) (2). This was surely more than a reference to the grave, although “bed” may have been such a reference. For example, David said, ‘If I make my bed in Sheol behold thou art there’ (Psa. 139:8). It must have been at least a hint of the life to come when God shall right all wrongs. This concept of the future foreshadows the full revelation in the New Testament.

Vv. 3-13 – Idolatry and Faithlessness Severely Rebuked

Isaiah's language becomes severe as he denounces the people's idolatry. He described them as children of sorcery, adultery, and prostitution, and as rebels and liars (3-4). They continued the sins of past generations.

He described the idolaters' wickedness (5-10). Their lust burned everywhere and they sacrificed their children to false gods. They built worship sites on hills all over the land and even brought idols and other pagan symbols into their homes (5-8).

The sexual imagery of v. 8 probably suggests that fertility rites were part of the people's idolatry. The people had abandoned their true love – the Lord Jehovah – to worship idols.¹ Any form of idolatry erodes faith in God; therefore, it is only natural that the idolatry described by the prophet has led Judah to look for help from someone other than Jehovah. They went to some unknown king with oil and sprayed themselves with perfume to become more attractive. The charge that they had debased themselves even unto Sheol shows the depth to which they had fallen in their departure from God (9). Isaiah observed that the people had actually worn themselves out with all their idolatry, but still did not repent (10).

Jehovah questions why the people did not fear him, asking whom they did fear in preference to him. They had lived a lie before him by practicing false righteousness, they had not remembered him in times of crisis, and they had not laid to heart the power of God to deliver. God had kept his peace by restraining judgment against them, but they still did not fear (reverence) him. His longsuffering had availed nothing (11).

Isaiah reminds the people that their own works will not profit them (“the arm of flesh will fail you”). Indeed when they cry out and gather those who are to deliver them, it will be so ineffectual that the slightest wind will blow them away. Isaiah concludes by holding out hope – “He that taketh refuge in me shall possess the land, and shall inherit my holy mountain (12-13).

Vv. 14-21 – The Condescending Love of God

“And he will say.” The “he” must be Jehovah, indicated by the reference to “my people.” Jehovah calls for a highway to be prepared on which his people can return to him (14). Isaiah was the construction foreman to see that every obstacle was cleared. The language is similar to prior highway imagery (35:8; 40:3-4). The construction job can be more fully appreciated when we understand Israel's topography.

1. This is a dominant theme of the prophet Hosea.

Isaiah describes the stark contrast between God's nature and God's expectation for humanity. The Lord was high, exalted, and holy, but he condescended to dwell with the contrite and lowly in spirit. He looked specifically for those who humbled themselves and recognized their need for him. He will revive them, *i.e.*, give them strength (15).

God's judgment was a response to the people's persistent sin. Nevertheless, he assured his people that his anger would not remain forever. "For my name's sake will I defer my anger" (48:9). If this were not so, man's whole inner life would be overwhelmed by hopeless despair, and God's purpose in making man would fail. Consequently, let man "account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation" (2 Pet. 3:15) (16).

Covetousness is now added to the sins of idolatry (see Col. 3:5), preferring foreign kings to Jehovah, lies, and forgetting God. The greedy oppressors of Isaiah's day are described by Micah as cannibals who skin people alive and eat them; who spend their time thinking up ways to get that which belongs to another (Mic. 2:1-2; 3:1-4). For this conduct, God smote them.² In spite of Jehovah's judgments, the nation continued in its backsliding way (17).

Jehovah had seen their evil ways, even their continuing in their rebellion, but even so Jehovah will heal them. No time is stated for the healing, but it is obviously after the time that God's wrath is satiated. He will lead them, directing their paths aright (40:11; 52:12). He will restore the spiritual comforts that have been withdrawn because of sin. While mourning is often associated with death, it is more likely here that it is an expression of grief over the condition of the nation (cf. Ezek. 9:4) – they mourn over their sinful ways (cf. 22:12) (18).

As part of their healing Jehovah will create the fruit of the lips (*create* means to bring something new into existence). The Lord will make it possible to say *peace, peace* (or

2. The singular in the text probably refers to the nation collectively. Micah's language is certainly plural.

perfect peace). That peace will be for those both far and near. This can refer to those still in the homeland and those in exile, but in light of Old Testament prophecy and New Testament teaching it may also refer to Jews (those near) and Gentiles (those far off) (see Acts 2:39; Eph. 2:17) (19).

While the redeemed will enjoy healing and peace, there is no rest for the wicked who, like the sea, will have no rest and cast up mire and dirt. It may be that the wicked Jews are in the prophet's mind, but it is a perfect description of all of the wicked in their restless and unregenerate condition. The final statement is absolute: "There is no rest for the wicked" (20-21).

SECTION THREE

National Sins, Redemption by Jehovah, and Future Glory

CHAPTER FIFTY EIGHT

Right and Wrong Observances of Fasts and Sabbaths

An Introductory Word

Because of the close relationship between chapters 57-59, it is difficult to know where one section ends and a new section begins. It is also difficult to place this section in any particular point in history. The proposed times range from Isaiah's writing of the transgressions and hope of the people of his own day, to both "Deutero-Isaiah" writing in the captivity and "Trito-Isaiah" writing in the period following the exile. Since, as

we have seen in the introduction, the evidence of the unity of the prophecy and Isaiah's authorship of it all is so overwhelming, there can be no real dispute with the conclusion that Isaiah wrote these chapters and is addressing the sins and hope of the people of his day. While not much is said about the Jews conduct during the exile which makes it difficult to say that the abuses Isaiah here condemns were prevalent at that period, we do have the statement of one of Isaiah's contemporaries, Micah, "For it is an evil time" (Micah 2:3).

In prior sections Isaiah has discussed the captivity to come, the assured return of the remnant, salvation in the Servant, and the glory of future Zion. He now turns his attention to present conditions. To the extent the time can be determined, perhaps the most reasonable suggestion is that it is at some time after Sennacherib's defeat and return to his homeland (ch. 37) and the prophecy of the Babylonian exile (ch. 39). If so, then Isaiah has collected various prophecies from his earlier ministry and preserved them in the last chapters of his book. They are placed at this point because they relate to the Babylonian captivity that is the subject of chapters 40-66.

Vv. 1-2 – Cry Out! Spare Not!

As the last prophecy of the second book contained all the three elements of prophetic addresses—reproach, threat, and promise—so this, the first prophecy of the third book, cannot open in any other way than with a rehearsal of one of these. The prophet receives the commission to appear as the preacher of condemnation; and while Jehovah is giving the reason for this commission, the preaching itself commences.

Isaiah is charged to **"Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet."** The cry is to be with full throat (Ps. 115:7; 149:6). It is to be heard because it is a voice of warning. Delitzsch says of the word **"trumpet,"** that it means "with all the strength of the voice, lifting up the voice like the *shōphâr* (not a trumpet, which is called *הַצִּפְרָה*, nor in fact any metallic instrument, but a bugle or signal horn, like that blown on new year's day (see Ps. 81:4), i.e., in a shrill shouting tone. With a loud voice that must be heard, with the most unsparing publicity." He does not speak merely of the stretch of the voice, but means by it that keenness and severity of language which hypocrites

especially need, as if God were throwing thunderbolts against them from heaven; for they are delighted with their vices, if they are not severely reprov'd and dragg'd forth to the light, or rather if they are not violently thrown down.

The message is to “**declare unto my people their transgression, and to the house of Jacob their sins.**” In spite of their transgressions they still hypocritically seek the Lord; they are eager to go through the formalities, they profess to delight in the knowledge of his ways; they act as if they have not forsaken Jehovah and feign delight in drawing near to him (Isa. 29:13; Matt. 15:8). In return, they ask for and expect God to give them righteous judgments, but “they know not what they ask.” Righteous judgment includes punishment for their transgressions (1-2).

Truly they need a preacher who will “spare not.” When he adds, *Spare not*, it is a mode of expression very frequently employed by Hebrew writers, such as, “I cry, and am not silent.” (Psalm 22:2) It is equivalent to a common expression, “Cry without sparing.” We have said that the Prophet does not speak of the mere sound of the voice, but means a severe and harsh reproof, which is very necessary to be sharply used towards hypocrites. For instance, if the prophets merely spoke of the Law of the Lord, and showed what is the rule of a good and holy life, and recommended the worship of God, and likewise reprov'd vices, but without employing any vehemence of language, what impression would that produce on hypocrites whose conscience is lulled in such a manner that they cannot be aroused but by applying spurs? And so a simple manner of teaching would not be enough, unless they were sharply attacked, and the thunderbolts of words were launched against them.

Vv. 3-12 – Hypocritical Formalism Versus True Fasting

The people want to know why they are in trouble when they seem to be doing what God has commanded. They **fasted** and **humbled** themselves, but they feared that God had not **seen it** or **noticed**. Apparently they thought that by going through the “motions” of religion (without any inward reality of faith) they would be blessed (3a).

God responds to their expressed concern by pointing out that he was more interested in their obedience than their rituals (see 1 Sam. 15:22). Unfortunately they, like many

people, had confused rituals with relationship, outward acts with true obedience. Their fasts did not alter their poor relationship with others. They were disregarding other peoples' needs by exploiting their employees (cf. Deut. 24:14-15; James 5:1-6) and by **quarreling** and fighting. Therefore their prayers would not **be heard**, for their kind of **fasting** was not what the Lord accepted. Their hearts, not just their **heads**, needed to bow before **the Lord** (3b-5).

Fasting was to encourage a person to respond positively to God's commands. In the Old Testament only one fast was commanded – the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29, 31). So the Lord reminded the people that they should be just (Isa. 58:6) and openhanded with those in need-**the hungry** (cf. v. 10), **the poor ... the naked** (v. 7). They were to **loose the bonds of the wickedness, undo the bands of the yoke, let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke.** The Israelites were to consider themselves members of one family who at one time had been slaves in Egypt. Therefore they were not to neglect each other. When someone shared with one in need, it was a reminder that everything he owned belonged to the Lord. There is a bitter irony in Isaiah's words, just as when the ancients said, "not eating is a natural fast, but abstaining from sin is a spiritual fast." During the siege of Jerusalem by the Chaldeans there was a general emancipation of the slaves of Israelite descent carried out; but as soon as the Chaldeans were gone, the masters fetched their liberated slaves back into servitude again (Jer. 34:8-22).

The prophet now proceeds to point out the reward of divine grace, which would follow such a fast as this, consisting of self-renouncing, self-sacrificing love; and in the midst of the promise he once more reminds of the fact, that this love is the condition of the promise. This divides the promises into two. The middle promise is linked on to the first; the morning dawn giving promise of the "perfect day" (Prov. 4:18). The first series of promises we have in vv. 8, 9a: **⁸Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thy healing shall spring forth speedily; and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of Jehovah shall be thy rearward. ⁹Then shalt thou call, and Jehovah will answer; thou shalt cry, and he will say, Here I am.** The love of God is called "light" in contrast with His wrath; and a quiet cheerful life in God's love is so called in contrast with a wild troubled life spent in God's wrath. This life in God's love

has its dawn and its noonday. When it is night both within and around a man, and he is awakened by the love of God to a reciprocity of love; then the love of God, like the rising sun, opens a way through the man's dark night and overcomes the darkness of wrath, but so gradually that the sky within is at first only streaked as it were with the red of the morning dawn, the herald of the sun. A second figure of a promising character follows. The man is sick unto death; but when the love of God stimulates him to reciprocal love, he is filled with new vigor, and his recovery springs up suddenly; he feels within him a new life working through with energetic force like a miraculous springing up of luxuriance from the earth, or of growing and flowering plants.

Before Jehovah's promises reach their climax, Isaiah once more lays down the conditions upon which they rest: ^{9b} "If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking wickedly; ¹⁰ and if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul: then shall thy light rise in darkness, and thine obscurity be as the noonday; ¹¹ and Jehovah will guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in dry places, and make strong thy bones; and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. ¹² And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places; thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in." The conditions are:

1. **Take away the yoke** – see v. 6 – loose the bonds of wickedness and undo the bands of the yoke (9b).
2. **Take away the pointing of the finger** – pointing at one in scorn (9b).
3. **Draw out thy soul to the hungry** – not merely giving bread, but giving sympathy and compassion with it (9b).

If the people meet these conditions, God will bless them:

1. **Then light will rise in their darkness**, often a picture of blessing (10).

2. **Their obscurity will be as the noonday** (10). This appears to be related to No. 1. The word translated “obscurity” is the common Hebrew word for darkness. It is used sometimes figuratively for “judgment.” Thus, it could also refer to a termination of God’s wrath (see 51:21-23).
3. **Jehovah will guide them continually** (11).
4. **Jehovah would satisfy their soul in dry places** (11) – comfort their souls in times of spiritual drought.
5. **Jehovah will make their dry bones strong** (11) – “bones” refers to the whole body, therefore God will prepare them for battle. This could and in the context is, I suggest, spiritual warfare (see Ezekiel 37).
6. **Jehovah will make them like a watered garden and a spring whose waters never fail** – satisfaction and fertility (11).
7. **Their offspring will rebuild the waste places** – this may refer to either the physical rebuilding after the return from captivity or to the rebuilding of the spiritual waste places of Isaiah’s time. Given God’s conditions for the blessings, the latter seems more probable. Moreover, a spiritual remnant does raise up the foundations on which every generation builds. They repair the breaches in the walls of Zion and restore the old paths, the good way in which to travel and dwell (cf. Jer. 6:16).

Vv. 13 – 14 --- Proper Observance of the Sabbath

The Sabbath observance needed both spiritualizing and increased strictness. From 2 Chron. 36:21 we learn that the sabbatical years had been little observed during the later Jewish kingdom; and it would seem from the present passage (comp. Jer. 17:21–23) that even the observance of the Sabbath itself had been neglected. Not that the neglect was total. The sacrifices proper to the Sabbath were duly offered—the “solemn assembly” was duly called and attended (ch. 1:13); but during the rest of the day business flowed in its usual course—the complete sanctification of the entire day was

set aside. We find a similar laxity prevalent after the return from the Captivity (Neh. 10:31; 13:15, 16) (13).

Then shall communion with Jehovah become a real pleasure. The acts of worship shall not be done merely from a sense of duty, because commanded, but because they are congenial to the soul of the worshipper. A right use of the Sabbath will help to form in men habits of devotion, which will make religion a joy and a delight to them. **I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth;** *i.e.* "I will give thee a prominent position in the earth, and cause thee to occupy its high places, and bear rule over many nations." Something more than a "taking triumphal possession of Palestine" is evidently pointed at (see Deut. 32:13). **And feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father.** The world itself was the "heritage of Jacob," since in him and his seed "all the families of the earth were to be blessed" (Gen. 28:14). Israel, having laid aside its formalism, and turned to God sincerely, keeping fast and Sabbath as God would have them kept, not in just the letter, but also in the spirit, would enter upon the promised heritage, and occupy the position originally assigned to it. Israel's rejection of the gospel made the mixed Christian church the inheritress of the old promises. It will happen, "for the mouth of Jehovah hath spoken it" (14).

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

Sin: The Wall of Separation

Vv. 1-8 – Jehovah's Charge Against the People

In chapter 58 Isaiah was charged to declare unto the people their transgressions. He spoke of their desecration of the Sabbath and their disregard for the law of fasting. Now he continues his task by rebuking the people's sin of wickedly ignoring God's law in general. The book of Micah is perhaps the finest commentary on chapter 59.

Isaiah begins by declaring the reason that the people had not recognized the salvation so often promised by the Lord. His hand was not shortened and his ear was not heavy. His hand could save and his ear could hear. It was not the Lord's fault; it was the fault of the people. Their iniquities had created a wall of separation from God and their sins had hid his face from God so that he would not hear (1-2).

There is no part of the body that has not participated in the sin (3, 4, 6, 7). Their hand and fingers were stained with blood; their lips and tongues spoke lies and other evil things, and never spoke with justice or integrity; their minds concentrated on evil plans that gave birth to evil acts; their hands held acts of violence while their feet ran to sin; they walked in crooked paths and thus did not know the path of peace. There was apparently no depth to which they would not sink (3-8).

Vv. 9-15a – The Prophet's Reply: A Confession of Wickedness

They were not worried. They trusted in **vanity** (4). This is the word for "chaos" in Gen. 1:2. The NIV translates "empty arguments"; the ESV "empty pleas"; the NKJ "empty words." It is often used to designate idols and the futility of idol worship. Their lives had no spiritual substance.

In vv. 9-11 the prophet includes himself when speaking of the people. Using first-person plural pronouns (**us we our**), he identified with the people (cf. 6:5). Israel was so corrupt spiritually, without **justice** (cf. 59:4, 11, 14-15) **and righteousness**, that it was as if they were in **darkness** and were **blind** and **dead**. As a result, the oppressed were angry **like** growling **bears** and moaned **like doves**. They wanted **justice** and help **but** found **none** (v. 11). Isaiah confessed that the people were noted for their **many sins**, deliberate **rebellion** (cf. 1:5; 58:1) **against the Lord**, lying, injustice, and dishonesty (12-15a).

Vv. 15b-21 – Jehovah's Response: Vengeance and Deliverance

Whatever distress Israel may have suffered at the hands of the heathen, the greater part of her suffering was self-inflicted. What God saw (no justice) did not please him. Isaiah has now worked his way through the keen reproach, of darkness of character,

and of mournful confession that has brought up the apostasy of the great mass in all the darker colors before his mind and from the fact that the confession proceeds from those who are ready for salvation. And now he comes to the description of the approaching judgment, out of whose furnace the church of the future is to spring. Jehovah saw, and “it was evil in His eyes.”³ That which was right (which He loves, Isa. 61:8; Ps. 37:28) had vanished from the life of His nation. He saw that there was no man there, no man possessing either the disposition or the power to stem this corruption (as in Jer. 5:1, cf., 1 Sam. 4:9, 1 Kings 2:2). He was astonished that there was no one to step in between God and the people, and by his intercession to press this disastrous condition of the people upon the attention of God (see Isa. 53:12); no one to form a wall against the coming ruin; no one to appease the wrath, like Aaron (Num. 17:12, 13) or Phinehas (Num. 25:7) (15b-16).

Because the nation was so utterly and deeply corrupt, Jehovah had equipped himself for judicial interposition. The equipment was already completed; only the taking of vengeance remained to be effected. Jehovah saw no man at his side who was either able or willing to help him in opposition to the prevailing abominations, or to support his cause. Then his own arm became his help, and his righteousness his support (cf., Isa. 63:5); so that he did not desist from the judgment to which he felt himself impelled. The armor that Jehovah puts on is now described. According to the scriptural view, Jehovah is never unclothed; but the free radiation of His own nature shapes itself into a garment of light. Light is the robe He wears (Ps. 104:2). When the prophet describes this garment of light as changed into a suit of armor, this must be understood in the same sense as when the apostle in Eph. 6 speaks of a Christian’s panoply. Just as there the separate pieces of armor represent the manifold self-manifestations of the inward spiritual life, so here the pieces of Jehovah’s armor stand for the manifold self-manifestations of his holy nature, which consists of a mixture of wrath and love. He does not arm himself from any outward armor; the armor is his infinite wrath and his infinite love, and the might in which he manifests himself to his creatures is his infinite will. He puts on righteousness as a coat of mail, so that his

3. An antiquated phrase from the Pentateuch, e.g., Gen. 38:10.

appearance on every side is righteousness. On his head he sets the helmet of salvation. For the ultimate object for which he goes into the conflict is the redemption of the oppressed, salvation as the fruit of the victory gained by righteousness. Over the coat of mail he draws on clothes of vengeance as a tabard⁴ and wraps himself in zeal as in a war-cloak. The inexorable justice of God is compared to an impenetrable brazen coat of mail; his joyful salvation, to a helmet that glitters from afar; his vengeance, with its manifold inflictions of punishment, to the clothes worn above the coat of mail; and his wrathful zeal with the fiery-looking garments. No weapon is mentioned; only his own arm procures him help. What will Jehovah do, when he has armed himself with justice, salvation, vengeance and zeal? He will carry out a severe and general retributive judgment upon his adversaries and enemies. Both Jew (adversaries) and Gentiles (enemies) seem to be included. This is suggested by reference to “the islands,” the regions that are inhabited by “the peoples,” foreigners or Gentiles (15b-18).

The result will be that God’s adversaries and enemies from the west to the rising of the sun will fear his name and glory. The second half of the verse is more difficult. If the text is followed, Jehovah will come against his enemies **as a rushing stream** driven by his own breath. If the margin is followed, it is the enemy that will come like a mighty flood. Whether it is Jehovah’s direct act or the raising up of one to execute his judgment, the lesson is the same – God is in control (19).

In the Old Testament the next of kin was a **redeemer** who had the right and responsibility to recover forfeited property or to purchase the freedom of a relative who had fallen into slavery. Isaiah uses the word in its fullest sense. At least twelve times in chapters 40-66 Jehovah is referred to as Israel’s Redeemer. In this instance, however, it is the Servant-Messiah to whom reference is made. He has been promised

4. A sleeveless coat or jacket consisting only of front and back pieces with a hole for the head and usually made of leather.

many times and his work has been well described. This is confirmed by Paul who applies this passage to Christ in Rom. 11:26-27 (20).⁵

The Redeemer has come; Jehovah makes the covenant (“the sure mercies of David” (see 55:3). Man either accepts its terms and enters into it, or rejects it. Established in the Servant (42:6; 49:8), it shall not be removed (54:10). The pledge **my spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart of thy mouth**, is spoken to the Redeemer. Jehovah has put his Spirit upon the Redeemer (cf. 42:1; 61:1), and by his teaching Jehovah has supplied the Redeemer words (see 50:4). The Redeemer will make no compromise; he will hold fast the truth as he has received it from Jehovah. The Redeemer **shall see his seed**, his spiritual offspring (53:10). “They shall come and shall declare his righteousness. Unto a people that shall be born, that he hath done it” (Psa. 22:30-31). There will always be a seed (a remnant) holding faithfully to his word, passing it on from one generation to the next. This promise has been fulfilled in the Christ who received his words from the Father, in the gospel, and in the church of Christ, the Kingdom.

5. Isaiah’s use of coming “to Zion” and Paul’s use of “come out of Zion” has given rise to discussions by commentators. Without discussing all of the comments, the apparent contradiction is easy to resolve. Isaiah speaks of the Redeemer coming to his own to offer salvation first to them (Matt. 15:24; John 1:11). When they rejected him he turned from them to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46-48; 18:6). This is Paul’s point. Jesus came to Zion to the Jews and from Zion to the Gentiles.